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Old Capitol: Portrait of An Iowa Landmark

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Moore's survey and the subsequent exhibition organized by the University of Minnesota Art Museum. The essays include Marion J. Nelson's case study of Norwegian Americans; Colleen J. Sheehy's essay on contemporary festivals and lawn art displays; Thomas Vennum, Jr.'s description of how a Plains Indian Grass Dance tradition was adopted by the Ojibway; Johannes Riedel's biography of Nicolas Castillo, Minnesota's foremost composer of Mexican ballads; and M. Catherine Daly's explanation of mitten knitting as symbolic of Latvian nationalism. On the surface this diverse group of essays lacks thematic unity. On reflection, however, the diversity supports Moore's contention that Minnesota's folk arts must be interpreted on a case-by-case basis: meaning, function, form, and process must be examined in context.

Circles of Tradition is a fine addition to the growing collection of state folk arts surveys. Although overly concerned with academic points of definition and categories, the exhibition and book are visually stunning. They are worth a look.

Old Capitol: Portrait of an Iowa Landmark, by Margaret N. Keyes. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988. xiv, 171 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$15.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY GERALD MANSHEIM, WEST BRANCH

In 1970 Margaret Keyes, at the time a professor of home economics at the University of Iowa, was appointed director of research for the restoration project to rehabilitate the former Iowa territorial and state capitol in Iowa City as a "living museum." The building, which was constructed in the 1840s, was turned over to the University of Iowa in 1857, when the capital was moved to Des Moines. Until 1970, it was used for a variety of academic purposes, but mainly for administrative offices. Over the years the building acquired a number of different names. By the time it celebrated its centennial in 1939, however, the name, "Old Capitol," was widely accepted.

In the 1960s the growing university's demands for space opened the possibility of expanding the administration and remodeling Old Capitol. The historic preservation movement was just beginning in Iowa, and the successful completion in 1968 of the restoration of the old state-house in Springfield, Illinois, which had been built about the same time as Old Capitol and designed by the same architect, offered a good example. Moreover, the preservation of Old Capitol was put forward as a positive, noncontroversial change that could heal some of the local divisions created by recent urban renewal and student unrest.

So the decision was made. The planners decided that the restora-

tion, which was to be completed as part of the American bicentennial celebration in 1976, should reflect the building's entire history. They also specified the creation of a historical record of the building and its restoration. This book is that record. The great number of people who aided in this endeavor are recognized in the acknowledgments and in three appendices.

The first three chapters of the book place Old Capitol in its historical and physical context. The first chapter deals with the architect and the construction and furnishings of the 1840s. Early room usage and campus expansion of the Old Statehouse Square are examined carefully in chapter two, "The University Years, 1857-1970." Chapter three, "Rehabilitation, 1921-1924," describes the problems faced during an earlier reconstruction of the aging, monumental building. The material in this chapter has been available elsewhere but not easily accessible, besides being too technical for the average reader. Here it is summarized and related to the history of the building and the problems ahead. The thirteen photographs and one drawing in this chapter lend much to the understanding of this skillfully executed rehabilitation.

In fact, the sixty illustrations add much to the entire text. There are eight historical photographs of Old Capitol's exterior and four of the interior, one dating back to the 1850s. There are two maps of Iowa City, one titled "Original Map of Iowa City, 1839," and a plan of Old Capitol, titled "Original Floor Plans of Old Capitol." The old Illinois statehouse is shown for purposes of comparison. An early Iowa City newspaper masthead depicts a projected capitol. An 1890s map of the old Red Brick Campus illustrates the changes the university made on the former Statehouse Square. If there are any doubts, the historical photographs clearly show that Old Capitol is indeed a venerable landmark and has become a prestigious restoration project.

Most of the illustrations are in the second half of the text (chaps. 4-6). There is one contemporary drawing and one photograph of the exterior. The interior is represented by sixteen contemporary photographs and one historical one. The emphasis on restoration furnishings provides a qualified image of the designs made and the work done. This second half of the text works more like a pictorial history, with such illustrations as the original lock and key to the east door, an 1893 voucher for furniture, an antique walnut secretary, and a chair of the same material which was found in the basement and suspected of having been used by the first president of the university, even though he never visited Iowa.

The three chapters in the second half of the book are short but lively, with the narrative occasionally changing into the first person. Like the eight previous building superintendents, whose decisions affected the

construction, completion, and rehabilitation of the building, Margaret Keyes formulated a plan, put it into action, and completed it. In writing about it, she seems to be on her own turf, discussing the process as it developed and the problems as they arose. She even brings in an element of suspense: Will the funding come through, and will it be adequate? Will the original floor plans be discovered? Are they in the copper box hidden in the secret cornerstone? The suspense is heightened when the original floor plans remain undiscovered. Without this basic information, how will the original character of the building be determined, and can the bicentennial deadline be met? Since the last chapter is titled "Dedication," we are sure that these seemingly insurmountable problems are overcome. As the back flap of the dust jacket puts it, "the restoration succeeded and Old Capitol's opening in July 1976 was a major contribution to the United States bicentennial."

Keyes concludes, in her epilogue, "Today, the history of Old Capitol continues to expand with the discovery of more historical facts." New discoveries would certainly enhance future restoration work, which does not end with the events described in this book; restoration work is, in fact, continuing.

It is difficult for any author to write about a project when he or she is a principal participant in the work. It is hard to pick out what is important when all the details are so familiar. Some of the evidence also raises a certain amount of skepticism. The drawing on page ten, titled "Original Floor Plans of Old Capitol," is confusing, for example, since the original floor plans, missing since 1843, have never been found. Surely this is a contemporary drawing, derived from a recent source for this publication. At least, it should have been given a more suitable title and possibly a date. Much is left to the imagination of the reader when it comes to the original plans. It would help the reader to know if any of the superintendents' reports of the original plans are, in any way, believable.

Many of the architectural facts relating to this particular historic building remain perplexing. This book and other publications have removed enough of the mysteries surrounding the restoration. Yet questions about John Francis Rague's original plans (floor plan or perspective drawing or whatever) have never been adequately answered, and some Iowa scholars think they never will be. Whatever Rague proposed in 1839 was never respected by those in authority and was presumably altered and then lost. The architect's name was forgotten and replaced with a legend.

In spite of the remaining unanswered questions, this book should be well received. The style is clear and straightforward, the personal approach appropriate for a large preservation project that demanded creative decisions.

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